

Hieron I, tyrant of Syracuse in the early 5th century, gathered a brilliant circle of poets to his city. One of these was the comic playwright Epicharmus, hailed by Plato as an equal of Homer (*Theaet.* 152 E), credited by the Dorians with the invention of comedy (Aristotle, *Poet.* 3 1448 a 30), and remembered by Theocritus, (epigr. 18) Horace (*Epist.* II 1,55 -59) and Statius (*Silv.* V 3,148-151). Yet, despite his great popularity, very little is known about the circumstances of the performance of his plays. Although he seems to have been writing for local Sicilian audiences, his plays are almost exclusively studied in the literary context of his Athenian contemporaries and Doric successors. One fragment, however, from an unidentified play of Epicharmus, implies that his comedies were officially judged. This line, together with some recent archaeological advances, suggests that a more formal context for theatrical performance existed in early 5th century Syracuse than has hitherto been assumed, and that the plays were staged as part of a comic competition.

The line is quoted as a proverb by Zenobius (vulg. III 64): 'It lies on the knees of the five judges.' He cites Epicharmus as the author and explains that the fragment refers to the judging of plays. However, most scholarly texts dismiss Zenobius' conclusion, arguing that the proverb came from Athens (Pickard-Cambridge 1962), referred to the judging of tragedy, and not comedy, in Sicily (Pickard-Cambridge 1962) or was simply a parody of a Homeric line (Berk 1964). In more recent work, the line is sometimes ignored altogether (Kerkhof 2001). But should it be dismissed so summarily?

Small pieces of the picture of theatrical productions in Sicily have been slowly put into place in the last two decades. Polacco and Anti re-excavated the theater at Syracuse, and suggested that a much more formal structure existed earlier than had hitherto been thought (Polacco and Anti, 1981 and 1990). Dearden (e.g. Descoeudres 1990), Taplin (1993) and Csapo (*Phoenix* 1986) have reopened the question of the *phlyax* vases, mapped out a clearer interpretation of the performances reproduced on them, and suggested that they may depict large-scale productions of well-known literary comedies.

In view of these archaeological advances, Zenobius' attribution of the fragment to Epicharmus, and his explanation of its meaning, should be reexamined. There seems to be no good reason to doubt either one. For example, his careful citation of six other fragments of Epicharmus, and several fragments of the later Sicilian comic writers, Sophron and Xenarchus, suggest that he had quite comprehensive sources at his disposal. Moreover, the line itself is in keeping with Epicharmus' extant work, in style, meter and dialect; indeed, neither Kaibel (1958) nor Kassel and Austin (2001) doubt its authenticity.

Circumstantial evidence also points in the direction of competition at comic festivals and public performances. For example, cult rituals of Artemis at Syracuse included a singing competition at which a victor was acclaimed, and his rivals banished from the city (*Schol. in Theoc.* proleg. Ba17-Bb14). From fifth-century Gela comes a lead tablet inscribed on one side with a curse to help the writer's beloved, Eunikos, win in an *agon* (Dubois 1989). The curse is directed against the *choregoi* of other competitors. Dubois suggests that although no theater has as yet been unearthed in Gela, there is no reason to discount the possibility that theatrical performances went on in the city as early as the 5th century. At the very least, the inscription shows that there were very early competitions of some sort of performance in Gela.

Like many tantalizing fragments from the ancient world, Zenobius' citation can never be conclusively verified, yet its claim that formal dramatic competitions were held in Syracuse is corroborated both by internal details of the fragment and by circumstantial evidence.